ANOTHER HAPPINESS
Luke 6:17-26
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"There must be something more to life than having everything." That's what Jules Feiffer observes in a delightful new book, Tantrum, a cartoon novel about a forty-two year old man who becomes two years old again and returns to total self-indulgence. That, Feiffer says, - that return to almost infantile self-indulgence is what is happening in American culture.

The English film director Blake Edwards has said the same thing in a devastating motion picture, "10". Edwards has said it so cleverly that millions of Americans are laughing at the comedy - which is good, and ogling the person who has earned the label "10", without ever hearing the fundamental and serious criticism of a culture which has decided apparently that the pursuit of pleasure is the most important process and the noblest quest in life. "10", about another forty-two year old man who makes an utter fool out of himself pursuing a beautiful young woman, is ultimately a poignant and sad movie which dramatically documents the bankruptcy of the going definition of happiness.

More academically, social scientist Christopher Lasch has written a penetrating analysis of our way of life under the title "The Culture of Narcissism" in which he observes the "all-pervading narcissist preoccupation with the self." Narcissus was the young man in Greek mythology who fell in love with his own reflection in a pool of water. Narcissism, as the word is used today, is simply the total preoccupation with self - self-awareness, self-growth, self-discovery, self-liberation, self-affirmation, self-gratification. It is our obsession: some would say our religion, our latest idolatry. It is the idea which I invite you to employ as introduction to the New Testament lesson for the day - from St. Luke's Gospel: Chapter 6,

> "And he came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea and Jerusalem and the seacoast of Tyre and Sidon, who came to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all the crowd sought to touch him, for power came forth from him and healed them all.
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> "And he lifted up his eyes on his disciples, and said: 'Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you that hunger now, for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you that weep now, for you shall laugh. Blessed are you when men hate you, and when they exclude you and revile you, and cast out your name as evil on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets.
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> "'But woe to you that are rich,for you have received your consolation. Woe to you that are full now, for you shall hunger. Woe to you that laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep. Woe to you, when all men speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets.'"

William Barclay calls them Luke's bombshells. They are certainly in radical contrast to a way of life that suggests that true meaning and real joy will be the result if we "grab all the gusto we can get". Someone has called them the "terms of God's contract with the human race". They portray a view of human life almost totally opposite from the one which prevails. The passage suggests, dramatically, that things aren't what they seem; that God is looking at things differently from the way we see them, and that some of our cherished values to which we give obeisance and for which we work very hard are, in fact, totally, 180 degrees wrong.

You probably recognize the passage as Luke's version of the Beatitudes - a longer list of which is the introduction to the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel according to Matthew. You may also have recognized that whereas Matthew softens the impact by rendering it, "Blessed are the poor in spirit", Luke says simply "Blessed are you poor". Matthew reads "hunger and thirst after righteousness" while Luke announces simply "Blessed are you that hunger now". They are vivid blessings. We may not know what "poor in spirit" means - but we certainly know what poverty is. "Hungering after righteousness" may be a bit of a mystery, but hunger is not. Luke's beatitudes are sharp, earthy, real - "Blessed are you that weep now, for you shall laugh." The power and intensity of the passage, however, is a result of a literary device the author employs. For each "Blessed are you" there is a corresponding "Woe". "Blessed are you poor"..."Woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation". Jimmy Dean used to tell the story of the little old lady in the back pew of a church up in the mountains of Appalachia. Each time the preacher delivered an enthusiastic broadside against the evils of liquor, dancing, card playing she responded with a vigorous "Amen!" But when he began to inveigh against chewing tobacco she announced in a loud voice: "Now he's stopped preachin' and gone to meddlin'."

That's what happens to us somewhere between Matthew's "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" and Luke's "Woe to you that are rich". Somewhere in there we sense a bit of "meddlin'".

It would be unfaithful to the text to soften it: to suggest that Jesus really didn't mean it; somehow to squeeze it into the mold of our own values and priorities.There is something to be said simply for allowing scripture to address us where we are and then let the chips fall wherever they may. Marxist theoreticians love this passage: it seems tailor made for the ideology of revolution, the abolishment of private property and redistribution of wealth. There can be no question, it seems to me, that the passage - and the whole New Testament witness - ought to make us very uncomfortable with the fact of economic injustice in the world.

And yet the Bible resists being made to serve as a handmaiden of political or economic ideology - ours or theirs. Jesus wasn't a capitalist, but He wasn't a communist either. My guess is that He would have critical things to say about what either system has accomplished. I don't think it's simply a middle class American rationalization to point out that the Marxist ideal simply has not worked: that in the process of redistributing wealth and abolishing capital something very important always gets eliminated from the human situation: liberty, freedom and most individual initiative. Jesus was poor. He lived His life among poor people. His country was poor. The major preoccupation for everyone He knew was the provision of food for the next day. The contrast between poverty and wealth was tremendous and dramatic and immediate.

Poverty is not celebrated here. That, I think, is the most unfaithful interpretation of all. There is nothing romantic about being poor; the myth of the simple goodness of life for poor people exists only in dishonest literature. It is a mistake to allow the street people in "My Fair Lady", for instance, to define poverty. Poverty - today - is wretched, complicated, unpleasant. There is nothing blessed about it. William Barclay taught that the key to the whole passage is the word Luke tells us Jesus used to describe what rich people "have" or "receive". "Woe to you - you have your consolation". Barclay points our that the word in Greek means to be "paid a debt - something owed". People who demand nothing from life but riches, he seems to be saying, will probably get that and nothing else. It's the self-sufficiency, the need for no one - not even God, the distance from others and the arrogance that bothered Jesus. That person - Jesus said - is greatly to be pitied. That kind of wealth - is simply antithetical to human happiness.

Happiness - that's what the Gospel is about: not grim, long faced piety, but gaiety, joy; not sober morality, but the glad, loving, embracing of life. "Blessed" - the Greek

"makarios" is better translated "Happy". "How happy are you poor". The Gospel of Jesus Christ - the Christian faith today - is about happiness. The cutting edge of Christian faith today is precisely as it encounters a culture which has bought an entirely different set of definitions; a culture described by Feiffer's book Tantrum, the movie "10" and the TV slogan "If I have only one life to live - let it be as a blonde".

How to be happy according to the criteria of this culture? There are four elements in our definition: youth, affluence, power and gratification - four experiences that constitute what we want out of life. Let's look at each. We are obsessed with youthfulness - we spend billions of dollars to disguise the physiological changes which accompany aging. A happy person is a fifty year old who looks thirty; a forty-two year old in the middle of adolescence. Second, affluence - we are told every day that "things" will produce happiness: furniture, cars, clothes, gadgets - if we can afford enough, accumulate enough we will be happy. Third, power - control are, in a sense, the derivatives of wealth. Our culture seems to say that we are a failure nationally if we can't control the behavior and destiny of the whold world. We talk about "losing" nations as if we owned the place personally, we love the feeling that we - alone - are masters of our destiny, that we call the shots and are consumately in control. When things get out of control, even in the intimacy of our daily calendar, we get very nervous and very unhappy. And fourth, gratification - instantly - that's where it all comes to rest. We want it all - now. We are not willing to wait. We are not willing to sacrifice for something so vague as the welfare of the next generation. James Reston wondered editorially last week about the morality of a nation willing to offer up lives of American young people rather than conserving gasoline. We seem almost anxious to send in the Marines.

Some of that always has been self-evidently false. Youth, after all, is a temporary condition. Anyone whose happiness is tied to it is going to be unhappy for most of life. Some has become glaring false in light of our current situation. Affluence, for instance: more and more responsible scholars are suggesting that we must lower our expectations and begin to think about much more modest life styles. Some economists are talking about scarcity within decades and Presbyterian theologian Albert Curry Wynn wrote recently, "We must learn to live simply so that others may simply live."

Emerging in the new world of the 1980's is the idea that we are not a totally independent nation, in control always, that our destiny is inevitably tied up with the rest of the human family, like it or not. Columnist Michael Novak wrote in an editorial, "For generations peasants in Venezuela and Peru have plodded in poverty shipping goods and commodities so that Americans could grow wealthy and healthy: oil, coffee, bananas, copper, zinc. The world has for a long time been interdependent even though that word is only now becoming fashionable." (Cleveland Plain Dealer, 10/26/74).

Our lives, personally, follow much the same model. None of us willed ourselves into existence - we were conceived in someone else's love and born in someone else's pain and danger. None of us made ourselves into what we are today - there are no self-made people. For better or worse we are who we are in relationship with parents, brothers and sisters and a whole host of people who were present to us and influential in very formative ways. Even the orphan, abandoned at birth, who claws and scrapes himself up the ladder was given something - the strength and determination in the act of abandonment. Jesus suggested that it is a far happier thing to know that - to confess our poverty, for instance, if we were to be deprived the love and friendship of others, than to pretend as if we were self-sufficient.

The real crisis of happiness, however, is best understood, I think, in terms of the Narcissism described by Christopher Lasch. Listen to a paragraph from his book: "After the political turmoil of the sixties Americans have retreated to purely personal

preoccupations. Having no hope for improving their lives in any of the ways that matter, people have convinced themselves that what matters is psychic self-improvement, eating health food, taking lessons in ballet or belly dancing, immersing themselves in the wisdom of the East, jogging, learning how to relate, overcoming the fear of pleasure." (The Culture of Narcissism,p.29).

We have, I am convinced, been sold a bill of goods: no matter that we have sold ourselves on the idea that gratification of the self is the prerequisite for feeling happy. Using the sophisticated new vocabularies cheerfully provided by "pop" psychology, we have been convinced that selfishness is, after all, honestly human, therefore OK. What people before us called egotism, we call self-affirmation. Suddenly conceit is really self-confidence; arrogance - self-assurance; and grabbing - grasping for life, the honest expression of one's needs.

New therapies have suggested that ideas like self-sacrifice and self-denial, sacrificial love are oppressive, dangerous to mental health, outrightly neurotic. "Hell no, we won't go!" college people are shouting, and quite apart from the relative merits of the selective service system I hear in that defiant protest at least an echo of adult middle class culture. We told them that doing what I want takes precedence always. Lasch comments: "To liberate humanity from such outmoded ideas of love and duty has become the mission of the post-Freudian therapies and particularly their current popularizers, for whom mental health means the overthrow of inhibition and the immediate gratification of every impulse." (Ibid, p.43).

Without sounding judgmental and moralistic the Christian faith suggests today that we are quite simply, running on the wrong track - or marching to the wrong drummer - to badly mix a pair of metaphors. The trouble with us is that what we're doing isn't working. It isn't making us happy. The only thing instant gratification ever did for anyone was suggest itself as the norm. The antiquated, stern "Woe to you" of Jesus sounds, frankly, terribly timely. Sexual liberation, apparently, isn't making anybody happier. The research seems to indicate that an obsession with self, in sexual terms, has not turned us on so much as turned on us as Martin Luther said it would in his famous description of sin as the self curving in on itself. New sexual freedom seems to be responsible for a considerable increase in unhappiness, frustration and sexual dysfunction Christian faith suggests that the greatest favor you can do for yourself is forget yourself.

One of my favorite people is Joseph Sittler, retired Professor of Theology at the University of Chicago. Dr. Sittler was here in 1976: he is a good scholar, a man of rich humanity, who loves the arts and people and God and life, and I have learned very much from him as a young student, but now as a mature reader. On the occasion of his 75th birthday last fall the Christian Century interviewed him. Listen to Joe Sittler on the subject of Finding and Knowing Yourself:

"People frequently ask me how to find and know the self. Let me be quite personal. In my reflection, I have come to the surprising conclusion that I have never asked that question; it seems to be a traumatic one for many, but it has never been of concern to me. In a sense, I have been greatly blessed by having had a modest self-image as a child. I have a very smart older brother and a very beautiful older sister. I was just a third kid, and therefore I would simply open my eyes and look around and gawk and enjoy whatever there was to enjoy. By never asking who I was, I developed a self without pressing the question.

"Young people often come to me and say: 'I may drop out of school or leave this place or quit my job. I've got to go off by myself and find out who I am.' Well, I can understand the pathos of the situation and what motivates their feeling and can be patient with their convictions. At the same time, I'm very dubious as to success.

"You find that your self emerges more quickly if you do not keep scratching the question. If you lose your life,you find it, or it could be that it will find you. You will say: 'Now that seems to be what I am, or what I'd like to do.' I don't think you go to some sterile, barren land filled with sagebrush and gaze at your navel to find out who you are." (Christian Century, 9/26/79, p.915-16).

The Gospel of Jesus Christ suggests there is another happiness. It is so altogether different that it requires a conversion to experience it. You won't stumble into it watching television commercials. You won't even see much of it on religious TV programs. To follow Jesus Christ very far is to begin to discover it. It requires a kind of single minded obedience. We have to keep our eyes on Him, or we will slip back and start believing that a new car or a new sexual conquest or a new job really is the key to our happiness. The Christian faith maintains that there is another happiness available to anyone who decides to follow Jesus Christ. I don't know anyone who has thrown himself or herself into it and is miserable. I don't know anyone who works very hard for others who is unhappy. That is to say, it works. It is the truth. It is borne out in experience.

This other happiness - is letting go of power and influence and the need to manipulate in the knowledge that whatever power we may think we have is at best very short term: that God alone is in control. It is releasing our grip on our things a bit, acknowledging that none of it is permanent; that the most precious possessions of all are our gifts, given to us by other people, ultimately given to us by God himself. This happiness is in the remarkable discovery of our true self the moment we forget about self: the finding of life by losing life: receiving in the very act of giving.

All of it is caught up - mystically and majestically in the drama we will begin to celebrate next Sunday...the story of a Lord who died that we might live: a Lord who so represented God's love for us that He lived out the secret - hoping we might catch on, securing another, better happiness, seeing even in death the promise of life.

Blessed are you that weep now for you shall laugh.

Amen.

Eternal God, help us to be honest. Forgive us for selling out on occasion. Forgive us our self-inflicted unhappiness. Give us grace to see the truth. Give us courage to be strong and different and faithful. Give us faith to entrust our happiness to You: through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.